A WILL TO LEAVE

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என்னைப் பெற்று சாபம் ஏற்ற பெற்றோருக்கு

CHAPTER ONE

I often wondered whether I was different or whether the world treated me differently. Talking about differences, there was a place across the ocean, some people called it a myth while others called it a legend. By contrast, neither of them had ever witnessed it. Nor did I. But I had a pinch of hope I would until the knights showed up.

A dead silent road almost swallowed by the darkness all around. My truck woke the stillness with a deafening roar, the pistons flapped hard enough, and its crunching noise overlapped the oil pumps.

Three vehicles were speeding behind me: two knight-wheelers and a hatchback truck. They attempted to move from the left and box me in, but I took a surprise turn and cut them off. One of the wheelers got out of control and crashed into the corner. But the other one somehow caught up and climbed the wall. I tried to crush the wheeler with it, but the rider was cautious enough to speed past me. When the wheels' spines left with just a slice from rear to front, the truck appeared. The gate opened followed by a huge knight climbing to the roof with a long metal arm pointing at me.

If I were a little fast or a little slow, I would have been dead then, it was that close. The hit blew a huge hole in the door, at least it wasn't elemental.

I pushed more fuel into the motor and jumped forward. It kept about forty yards between us at least. There was no way to reach me at that distance unless the wheeler came in, inserted right under the truck and flipped it in the air.

The panel opened, and arm containers and element cylinders came loose. Bright, colourful sparkles exploded from random parts, creating a thrust that pushed me further with the truck. The truck smashed upside down on the still road, rolled a few hundred yards and flip-landed, trapping me between the truck and the road.

Flames covered the road. Smoke and dust clouded my vision. I felt the bones, one by one cracking under my muscles. A heavy pair of metal boots walked towards the truck and stopped by the opening. The knight removed his helmet and bent down to look at me, his face blurred and his hair hung low. The face then vanished above as he bellowed that I was dead.

I woke up from death when a poor rider cried in pain. I had reached the check when the clock showed thirteen, now the hand was between fifteen and sixteen. The rider slammed against the armoured thigh and hit the ground. Metal arms dragged him away from his truck. I took slow breaths and tried to ignore the activities but it didn't help.

Another knight in the same identical armour strode to the raider's truck, he put his knee down and bent to pick something. It was a Bulldog, elemental, twice the size of his metal palm. He caught me staring. His heavy boots manifested an enormous source of power as he walked through the road. He took a strange defensive position, "Your name," he said in his flat voice, echoing through his helmet. I gave him a made-up name that Orzaghmen's workers provided me. "Do you possess weapons?" As I denied he started to inquire about the cargo, signalling his colleague with his thick metal fingers. The other knight climbed in right away, into the truck; I could hear him breaking a crate or two and pulling some bottles out. Bluntly stole a crate and returned signals. I realised that they finally finished with me and

noticed the gate opening in front exposing the long journey coming. I powered the engines after receiving a subtle nod from the Knight.

I entered the forest all the way through the pine trees, passing the deadly terrifying beasts and betraying weather. After a long jam, crawling like a slug I crossed the lonely bridge across the hill-shaped land and reached an abandoned village made of stone. It was white everywhere, clouds occupied the whole place, clouds dripping from the roofs, clouds hugging the stone buildings, clouds snaking on the ground… I rode forward at the same pace, hoping there wouldn't be any pits hidden under the clouds. I stumbled across and almost crashed the truck when a golden goat walked right in front of it, followed by an old man walking as slowly as possible.

“You are late.” He looked towards me and grunted, “time don’t wait in this job.” He appeared older than ever. His square face with keen eyes was hidden by a bucket hat and the dead-aged moustache. He shrugged under a cotton fabric that flagged and danced in the wind. We called him Red Beard even though he didn’t have a beard. His moustache was so thick that the outsiders often took it for a beard and thus the name was born. No one alive on earth remembered his real name so they began to refer to him by the same. Rumour was that he could be an orc-elf, but everyone knew Orzaghmen was the first, who Red Beard worked for.

He didn’t wait, just turned around leaving the sheep and kept walking, neither fast nor slow. I had to get out and run to catch up with him.

“I thought you would be gone,” he said.

“I wish the same.”

“They promised to send “They promised to send their best one.”

“Ain’t they?” He gave no reply nor a nod. “You are disappointed!" I said, slightly in a mild tone. I wasn’t sure what he expected from their best smugglers but he was definitely disappointed.

“Shouldn't I?” He walked through a thick line of clouds spreading vastly. It was a cave, a small one. There was no way to return with the truck through this. We walked more than a mile, piercing through the clouds until we reached the other side. The other side was open, with fewer trees and more space to walk around.

“A lot has changed,” he said. “The knights started hunting hard, no one has ever survived a knight chase since then. Orzaghmen’s supply chain has completely crippled.”

So that was the reason behind all this, why would they demand a languish, distorted smuggler after years of retirement? They needed someone who could get things done, so they announced a huge payment. Good for me, I would be truly retired after this, gone far away across the ocean and no return.

Red beard halted in front of a large wooden door with cravings all over it; half hidden under the twine, surrounded by dirt and trees.

“The truck doesn't fit through this,” I said.

“There’s an underground way, can even move an army through it. And you don’t need to bring the truck anyway, they provide you with one. Using the same truck to return is a risk.”

“Ahh, a lot has changed.”

“Surviving the knight chase doesn’t make you the greatest smuggler, maybe it’s just a bit of fortune,” he said softly. “And I’m pretty sure they didn’t pay you for that.”

They didn’t pay me, yes, because the knights seized the arms. I didn’t know if I was great then, but I wouldn’t dare miss the opportunity again. I pushed open the door just to find that it was not just a door but a massive gateway to Condor, through which a dense blow of dust hit my face.

CHAPTER TWO

It was vast, vaster than any place I have ever been, vaster than the ever-crowded old orcs' market. It perfectly symbolised the name *Condor,* the elevations extended all the way above and pierced into the immensely dazzling, colourful sky. Elvish Magic. The calmness left me behind as I walked in. With bustling all around, I moved to the wall as the gate closed and opened behind me. Individuals kept flowing through it like shots from canon.

The wall looked to be formed by natural rocks. It was like a battlefield left alone after a long battle. I spotted gnomes with long-range weapons above the rocks aimlessly shooting around, creating dust. Bits of marble peeked through under the rocky dust-filled terrain.

A loud roar of excitement from behind, Ellmut Goldstitch, the four feet gnome-friend surprised me, "master Clinten!" Ellmut was the kindest of the gnomes I had ever met, an extremely talented alchemy expert, one of the few who have been here from the very scratch. "I thought you left." He gave me a warm welcoming hug and a brief look at me from top to bottom. His grey beard had completely faded into white, his face bared more wrinkles than ever.

"Couldn't afford to, Ellmut," I chuckled.

He smiled, "I'm afraid it's your first time after rebuilding!"

"That's right." I slightly managed to smile glancing around.

“It’s always been on the papers, a long-lasted dream of Edwin, made possible by greedy men and their hardworking knights.” He looked up and looked at me as his pride grew more. “They tried to catch us on sight, so we disappeared like air.” The last time I came it was just a small arsenal, at least small compared to what it became. Crawling around like a giant spider, from one place to another, hiding from men. A smaller doorway works almost the same, like a portal that connects different places together. “It’s my bad fortune that I can't show you around. I hope you don't leave with this small part.” Small part? What did he mean, was there a bigger part?

“Sure,” I promised.

He gestured to me in a direction and left for work. I started wandering around like a bee lost in the garden. I had no idea if this existed. I realised one thing for sure: Edwin had turned it into what the men feared it would become.

On the way, I encountered a small chunk of rock shaking with pieces of it scattered around. It was like a heap of ice melting into the water but in reverse, the chunk emerged from the marble ground to make a rock of seven feet, the exact height as mine. There were lots of similar rocks around, destroyed and reformed by magic, there were camps with gnomes and dwarfs playing with arms. I walked past all those camps until I caught him in a short-range field. He was the most recognisable, as young and charming as he had been.

Edwin Wilburt, a dwarf-elf with red hair, must be older than ten men together who still retained his young appearance. They called him *the craftsman who adopted spellwork.* His face overplayed the rich outfit covered by a fine silk overcoat, bright gloves covered above the fingers and a communicator as small as a brick, hanging below his waist. He held a broad elemental pistol, a Bulldog against a piece of rock. It looked bigger in his

hands, it had a yellow element within the cylinder that looked more like oil. A thin line of beam emerged from the nozzle when he pulled the trigger, forming a long hard icicle when hit the target and dug deep into it. It suddenly became still and quiet until a thin line of smoke peeked through the slit. The smoke became thicker, and a saffron light broke it to start a bright flame that melted the whole rock down.

He lowered the arm and offered a pair of gloves similar to his. Its skin was rough and thick enough to protect fingers from the element, yet it felt surprisingly comfortable. I had to wiggle my fingers in, for it to completely fit my hands, “thanks,” I said.

“Nothing more than what you offer,” he didn’t look at me until then, pulled out a communicator from the belt, adjusted the regulator and switched some levers. Weird noises struggled to get out of the communicator. He muttered under his breath surrendering the arm to a dwarf beside him and crossing me like someone in a hurry. “It isn't always like this.”

We stopped at a blue metal gate in the other corner of the ground. Almost immediately I started to hear the engine roar and chains drag, scratching with one another. It all stopped with a sudden bang, raising the gate above like a mammal opening its huge mouth, disclosing an elevator behind it. The elevator was an inch below the storey and left a broad gap in between, perfect to get my foot stuck. We passed the gap and stepped in, saw the gate drop back slowly like a window shutter extended by the screaming of chains. We rapidly moved up except for two brakes in the middle, like a rail catching up with the wind. The gate opened and we reached the storey before I noticed it wasn’t powered by the elements, but instead driven by some external power supply.

CHAPTER THREE

I felt a faint sense of dizziness and was about to throw up, but strangely Edwin had no effect from the travel, he continued to walk into the storey. I followed him to the floor from the other end, an entrance to one of the most artistically crafted courts, built in an elvish style of architecture. The floor was neatly cut, shining marbles perfectly stuck together with cream in the middle, through which green leaves of irregular sizes peeped out. It contained fewer people than the training ground, the ceiling was close enough supported by pillars and one giant spider statue in the middle. The walls spread like expertly carved wooden designs, and there were statues everywhere, statues of people I didn't recognise, statues of armours in the size of orcs, statues of weapons, finest of them all was the one in the middle, a metal spider with no head but posed like a real one climbing to the ceiling. There were lots of chambers closely built, chambers big enough to hold a hundred dwarfs, chambers with single narrow floating tables, and chambers with one long phase.

Edwin took me to the control room, which was something similar to a shiny rail cockpit. There were an enormous number of levers, clock-like dials, gauges, knobs and tiny switches tossed by a dwarf named Armdan. Armdan Silverfoot was the second most important person in Condor, the right arm and mentor of Edwin, he never spoke more than two sentences. His apron was covered in oil stains, a communicator similar to Edwin's tied with the belt, and his bald head was restrained with a war helmet. After switching the whole row he pushed down one of the big levers which immediately put off all the lights, turning the room into a dark night, save a few red lamps. He unloaded an almost empty cylinder from a holder and dropped it into a narrow opening. He opened a cupboard under

him and unpacked another cylinder from it. The leather pouch tore open, the cylinder glowed like a huge cut of crystal, an element thick as oil danced inside it, illuminating the whole room. Armdan inserted it into the holder and immediately the lights went back as the lever pulled itself up.

We walked together to the corridor after a short inaudible argument between Edwin and Armdan regarding the communicator. A wide bridge supported by long piers spanned above us. We reached a room that almost looked like a library, the shelves hit the ceiling, yet instead of books, they were filled with folders and papers. Armdan pulled a folder and passed a leaf of paper to Edwin, who carefully pressed his inked thumb on it without much reading. He put back his gloves before passing them to Armdan. Edwin thanked me again before we left the room to pick up the arms.

Armdan took me back to the elevator, the gate opened and it was empty as we left it. I stepped in after him and saw the storey disappearing between the slits as the gate shut.

“So it’s been six years, isn’t it?” Armdan said.

“Yes, it is.”

“Returning after six years, just to face the end.”

“I admire your expectations,” I continued, “but there won’t be a chase tonight.”

“Will see.”

The carriage started to smell like ripped beans toasted by the elements. I stood still, waiting for the gate to open, waiting to grab the truck. That was when Armdan took his communicator and spoke to himself, he banged it thrice and spoke again; tried all the levers and switches, but received only a few beep sounds.

He looked around and above, and requested me to give him a hand. I knelt down and extended my hands on which he climbed and caught the ceiling without any warning. He unscrewed the metal plate with the tools he had in his apron, hanging like an ape. He smashed the plate and made it fly out. “It’s stuck,” he announced.

I was in the world’s most coveted arsenal, stuck in an elevator with a smelly smith named Armdan Silverfoot, unsure of what would happen next. He pressed my shoulders with his big fat boot and climbed above the ceiling. I faced the ceiling with a wide open mouth hoping for an explanation. He finally dropped his hands, spreading the rough fingers. Should I climb the rest of those floors? “Here,” he commanded, extending his hands even longer, I climbed the ceiling to find the door five feet above us. He requested me to bend again, but this time more like ordered. He climbed above me and somehow pushed open the gate.

I froze in place, bent over like a crane, staring at my feet when the explosion sent him flying back to the ceiling. His blood flowed onto my cleats, making them wet, and he lay there motionless, his breath no longer coming. He was dead.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Who is it?” A voice echoed from afar.

“Didn’t see the face. But got him,” the other knight said.

“Then move your ass…”

There was a passage of stillness, then the footsteps gradually descended away. I finally left the breadth that I didn’t realise holding for a long time. The blood started to stink, and the wet leaf signed by Edwin soaked in it. Was I dreaming? I jumped to stick with the wall when a sudden cracking sound echoed again, but it wasn’t from the storey, it was from Armdan. I stretched my leg and gently flipped the heavy body into the pool. The voice echoed again from the brick-size communicator he held in his hands. I slowly leaned to reach it, it took a while as his fingers were tightly wrapped around the communicator.

“Armdan-” Edwin’s voice boomed from the communicator.

“This is Clinten,” I murmured.

“Clint… Connect me with Armdan.”

“He’s…” I checked the wet body in the pool. “He’s dead.” Silence. My hands started to tremble. “Are you there?”

“Yes… Yes…”

“What’s going on?”

“It’s an unfortunate day, Clint,” the voice came with a sigh. “We have been captured.”

My mind went back, and pushed me to my knees, a lot of questions ran through my head but none of it dared to utter on my lips.

“I need to get out of here.”

“I wish I could help.”

“Did you contact Red Beard? Did-”

“I tried,” he came up before I could finish. “He doesn’t appear in range.”

“Did you try other alternatives? Did you-”

“I'm sorry Clint, this wasn’t supposed to happen. Red Beard is our only contact.”

“He is right behind the gate.”

“I know. The gate is the only way in, I don't know how they surfaced. They didn’t pass the gate.”

They didn’t come through the gate, they didn’t know the opening that leads to Condor; the gate was the only way in and the only way out.

“They don’t know about the gate?”

“They might not.”

“So I can use the gate to leave.” There was silence, he didn’t say a word which means yes, there was still a possibility. “How to get to the gate?”

“The knights may not know about the gate, but they are everywhere,” he paused. “You cannot reach there.”

“If I get through the gate, I can get Red Beard,” I made him think, I made him realise I was the only option he had. “All I need to do is get there.”

“Where are you now?”

“I’m on top of the stuck elevator ceiling.”

“You can open the gate-”

“It’s already open.”

“Climb through it and find where you are,” he continued. “And don’t get yourself killed.”

I raised my head cautiously and peeked from the elevator gap. It was an empty passage, the floor was a plain metal layer filled with holes with another metal layer under it, one side was a simple brick wall and the other side was wrapped containers, a long ladder was placed against one of the containers.

I put all my strength, pushed the floor and climbed above. The storey felt more dangerous from above, I took each and every step with heedful cautiousness, ready to fall back any minute. I fell under the ladder and checked in all directions, when the surroundings were clear I made the climb. It was actually a short metal ladder, extended into a long one, it had wide steps held by hard rubber for balance.

As I climbed up, a stream of bright colours blinded me, and innumerable containers of tightly packed elements raised above me. Three giant metal arms suspended from the dark clouded ceiling, two of them swung the containers and wrapped them in the air stacking them on one another, the other pulled the

cylinders from the stack and sealed them into small carriage-like cases. A cold sensation passed through me, I took a step back and realised the elements under me.

“What have you done?”

“Are you in the storage?”

“Yes, I am.”

“There was no distribution, we didn’t know what to do with them,” he said casually. “Do you see the yellow wall with grey stripes, like a tunnel?” There was a huge wall at the end of the storey and its corner had an opening like a giant open mouth.

“Yes.”

“That’s the stairs, it leads directly to the testing ground,” the containers near the stairs cast shadows on the wall that moved around.

“There are knights.”

“Where?”

“Everywhere.”

“I warned you,” a long silence occupied our conversation. “Do you swim?”

“What?”

“If you get down to the other side of the containers, on the right end you would find a small station with levers, I want you to reach there.”

I tried to track a path, but it wasn’t simple, the containers were arranged like a maze made for rats. I slipped down the

container and prowled straight till a turning appeared, I stuck to the corner and checked for knights before I made each turn. I somehow reached the middle where the containers led in three different directions. I dodged behind a huge stack when a knight strode through the way. Chills filled my neck. I saw him going past in his heavy metal armour wearing a massive bag on his back, almost inhuman.

I moved again, waited, moved again, and repeated until I reached the room at the end. It wasn't exactly a room but more like a booth with lots of small levers and one huge one in the corner, very similar to the control.

"I made it."

"Good, do you see the lever?"

"Which one?"

"The biggest one," he continued. "Pull it."

I hesitated for a moment but realised there was no better way I knew. It had some bumps in between but reached the bottom. I felt an instant impact on the floor, the layer under the holes vanished, bubbling noise raised from them, followed by water. The knights woke, shouted, and sent warnings. But before they could reach the source of the commotion, the whole storey was underwater. The element cylinders start to flow free. I grabbed the tiny breath possible in that little time and kicked my legs below.

Before getting trapped like the knights, I reached a certain height. Even when the element cylinders flew around, the knights stayed close to the ground. Their heavy armour pulled them to their feet. I didn't have such weights but I still had to pull and push the floating cylinders to gain forward. I checked

the yellow wall and the knights now and then, kicked and pushed; bubbles popped through their helmets, hands extended to grab me, arms raised, element beams projected through and went past me. One went right on the element cylinder, vibrated the whole surroundings and pushed me abruptly. I kicked the water as fast as I could but consistently got blocked between the wall and the beams. The beams formed waves flapping underwater, collapsing the whole storey. Upon reaching the opening, I discovered that a gate was blocking the stairs. I crouched down and used all my strength to land my feet on it. The gate burst open, and water rushed out, propelling me upward until I broke through to the air and floated to the shore of the higher floor.

I gasped and coughed trying to inhale, fell back on the half-submerged stairs, pulled out the wet communicator, and threw it aside.

The communicator immediately started making some juggling noise. “Good work,” the voice echoed.

“Why didn’t the element spread?”

“Water counteracts the elements.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“How do you know they can’t fly?” Edwin came up with a surprise.

“What do you mean?”

“I didn’t expect them to breathe either.”

I pulled my back and sat up. My legs floated freely on the water, I stretched them to have a good look at the stained thighs, “No.”

“What?”

“I got hit.”

“Can you make it?”

“Yes, yes, which way?”

When I walked into the testing ground I was stunned, it was empty, and the dwarfs and gnomes who were walking with arms, blasting elements on walls and ceilings were nowhere to be found. I didn’t waste much time glancing at the empty ground, ran directly to the gate and pulled them, pulled again.

“It doesn’t open”

“I’m not getting it yet,” he said. “Where are you?”

“I have reached the gate, the ground is empty, and the gate doesn’t open.”

The voice came over a moment of silence, “There will be a lever next to the gate.” It was a red lever with a yellow

handle and black stripes. I held the handle and pressed it to the bottom. Nothing happened. I pulled it back and pushed again. I tried it a couple of times.

"It doesn't work."

"They must have stopped the whole power."

I cursed out loud as the pain spread through my thighs like sharp needles pressed against the flesh. A yellow puss began to seep from the wound, blue veins spanned down to my feet, and I was losing it.

"What?"

"The hit."

"If you turn around and walk you can reach the palace we met today, there will be meds…"

I started walking before he could finish, my eyes started to blur, and the dizziness took over, I saw the rocks melting, sand flowing away from it, and the whole ground spinning. I followed the same steps I took when I came in. I raced towards the red mark, tried not to slip, but got knocked out on the desk.

There were lots of boxes, green, blue, and saffron. I randomly pushed to the blue box and opened the half-melted green box.

"It's locked."

"There must be a key somewhere around."

I wrapped the box against me and pulled the slit with my fingers. "Got it," the stuff fell and disappeared into the ground. I put my hands down and caught a cylindrical tube, pulled the cap out with my teeth and pushed the needle against my thigh. At

least my sight started to clear, I could see the mess I made. The box was in three pieces scattered around along with its belongings. The pain started to die slowly as I took some rapid breathing. I grabbed a stripe of tape and wrapped it around my thigh.

"You good?"

"Yes"

"You can find arms in the same place."

I laid my eyes on one of the arms I had pushed while falling. It was a long barrel that the gnomes used to cover long distances. The last time I touched a weapon was when I was a kid when I found a colossal axe hidden under the house.

"You should keep moving," he said. "We don't have much time."

"You said there's only one gate!"

"I didn't deny it."

"Then where should I go?"

"The control room, we should be able to open the gate if we manage to switch back the power."

"We?"

"You can't do it, there are only two people who have access. One is me, the other one was the guy you left dead in the elevator."

There was a moment of silence. "So I have to rescue you before I can reach the control."

“Yes.”

“What should I do now?”

CHAPTER SIX

I grabbed everything I could before climbing to the next storey. I had the whole aid, the long-range arm, a respirator that fell from the box and the box itself.

I was astonished by the similarity the storey shared with the inventory, expanded just like it, and had open tunnel bridges supporting tracks, passing above and above. Trams that looked like squeezed crates were attached to the tracks, some knights walked along, and the others kept an eye on them.

“What are those trams?”

“As the production kept going, we were compelled to find a compact way to store arms,” he said. “They can be directly attached to the truck, and highly durable in knight chases.”

“So it’s another inventory.”

“Too late, but yes, for arms.”

“There are guards everywhere.”

“You cannot pass them without using arms.”

I took a deep breath, “ok, how to use it?”

“There, now open the Eagle,” he continued. “Unload and change the cylinder.”

“With what?”

“Didn’t you take the elements from the ground?” He said and waited, then continued when he didn’t receive an answer. “Did you at least bring the blue box?”

“Yes,” I put the blue box in front. It was like the same aid box in shape, with the same lock; it didn’t need a key so I inserted my thumb into the locks on both ends and pushed. The top popped out. “What are these?”

“It’s called smokers, blows toxic clouds,” it was like a handy cylinder with slits, and a lid on the top. Yellow elements glowed through the slits. “But you must be careful, you may end up dead if you rush.”

“I got a mask.” It felt like liquor inside the glass. I stuffed all six smokers into my pockets. “Will six be enough?”

“More than enough.”

I put on the respirator and strapped the taps around my head. I started to move through one of the bridges. There was nothing to fear other than the knights, just another bridge below and another above. I pulled one of the smokers and leapt to the bridge below me, triggered its ring and dropped it into the dark. The slits lightened the bridges as they went down. Immediately after the crashing noise, a big yellow cloud emerged below. I triggered another smoker and tossed it as far as possible to the track below me. Coughs started to echo everywhere, I raced towards the expanding cloud. A knight rubbed the floor coughing under his helmet. Another knight had already fallen asleep. I tried to avoid them and kept moving forward. I climbed above one of the trams on the track and jumped to the bridge above me. Then jumped to the bridge above it, then to another. I kept climbing until I reached the highest track. Pulled two more smokers and tossed them below. The cloud started to spread.

The top bridge was occupied by more trams than the ones below. I had to shift tracks, squeeze through, and occasionally climb and jump from one tram to another. I was

between two trams when a giant metal hand grabbed me by the neck and slammed me against the tram.

I pressed my thumbs through the knight's eye slits. He smashed me again, and the tram got off track and fell from the bridge. He ranged towards me coughing, and before I could turn back and run he pushed me off the bridge. We fell together on the track beneath us, shattering it as we crashed onto the next bridge. I thought he was dead but I was too occupied for leisure, before I could regain my footing, another knight pulled me up and strangled my neck with both of his metal hands. I caught a smoker and pushed it against his face. It took a moment but he threw me before collapsing. I was engulfed by a thick yellow cloud of gas. I attempted to wave it away and climb up but a knight emerged and knocked my face off with his helmet. He launched his hand, it landed on a tram as I dodged. I realised what he aimed for when I scented toxic through a thick crack on the mask. I put one hand on the mask and threw a smoker with another as I ran through the bridge.

Knights jumped from above bridges, so I threw a smoker above and started to climb to it. There was only one smoker left with me when I climbed the bridges. I spotted a knight on the bridge running towards me coughing. I waited behind one of the trams to put my hands around his neck and tighten until he goes to sleep.

I came out of the cloud and reached the top tunnel again. There was a bright way out through the opening behind the trams before a knight walked through them. He was holding a long arm in his hand and was wearing a massive bag on his back. He removed his helmet and tossed it below as he marched towards me. Before he could reach me I jumped to him and pushed the arm off his hands. His red eyes were staring at me and his hand crushed mine with the smoker when he landed his heavy leg on

my face. The mask immediately crushed under his knee. He retreated his leg before he landed again, I dodged it and crashed on the arm. There was pride in his eyes, a cursing smile, his fingers triggering the smoker when his head burst into pieces.

The smoker rolled to my feet, I finally took off the respirator and inhaled slow breaths. All the clouds had vanished, and knights lay around on every bridge. Blood flowed to my feet wetting the smoker, I whipped it on my thigh and put it into the pocket. I walked forward and unzipped the bag he wore.

“Why didn’t some pass immediately,” I switched on the communicator and spoke.

“Some are stronger, It would take time.”

“Why didn’t you tell me it kills?”

“I thought you would hesitate to use them.”

“I got the elements,” I opened the bag, and counted six cylinders of bright green elements stacked together. “I got another Eagle.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The storey was a construction left halfway unfinished. The knights were everywhere, there were arms, loads and loads of arms stacked on the edges. But there were only a few bridges with few tracks and fewer trams on them. Some trams were open, not completely loaded, with arms sticking out. Beyond all this, huge mechanical noises played from the sky.

“Did you get any?” The voice echoed from the communicator.

“I’m looking at one,” I replied. “He’s isolated near a tram.”

“Don’t haste, once he’s completely in, take the shot.”

The knight walked beside the track, a dozen steps away from the tram. When he was exactly three steps away from a clear view, he turned and strode in a different direction.

“He’s away,” I shifted the focus to another knight, but he wasn't alone, so another and another. I spotted a knight behind a pile of metal scraps, standing still, perfectly fitting in the frame. I immediately took the shot. It looked like it was going straight to the head but just scratched his helmet. I pulled the trigger again when his head turned to me with a hand holding the bleed. It went through his eye split widening it. The heavy slam on the ground was overlapped by the noises above.

“One out,” I announced. I relaxed a bit and took my eyes off after more than an hour of searching.

“Congrats,” the voice echoed. “You did well.”

“I hate it.”

“Ahhh, just like every layman,” he said. “No one does it because they like it, they do it because they have to.”

I sighed and got back to work, putting my fingers a little far from the trigger. My holding wasn't as steady as before, the point swung around a knight like a feather in the wind. I pulled the trigger when he came slightly into the frame, it was a clear cut between his neck, and his underburnt head rolled on the ground along with the helmet.

I took my eyes off and checked the element in the arm when the announcement burst.

“Attention brotherhood. We suspect mysterious activities arising in Condor,” the voice came from all around. “We request you to stay guard.”

The voice faded without any details about the flood in storage or gas out in the inventory.

“Who was that?”

“Must be the knight commander,” Edwin replied. “He’s responsible for this operation.”

I realised the knights were not as stupid as to get sniped by an amateur. They just weren’t expecting it, in a place where the most powerful hand was of a half-elf. They started making hand signals and formed around.

I quickly perused the surroundings through the lens in search of someone alone. Unfortunately, the knights were well formed, they maintained an equal distance from one another, and expanded like a spilt element. I pulled the trigger twice at a knight who was close to the dead one. I continued to repeat it.

There was a clack from the Eagle that I completely missed, but Edwin's sharp ears somehow picked it up. "Change the cylinder," he said. It might last a fire but he strictly ordered not to risk it.

My eyes started to burn to look through the dirty lens, taking chances; I had to hand-load three more elements constantly. When I pick the fourth one, the bag was almost empty with two cylinders left,

I heard a voice from a distance. I immediately shifted my focus to the knight who spotted a dead one. I wasn't fast enough, he had already called out before I could act. The knights spotted me, opposite the direction he was lying. A rain of fire exploded around me, as I jumped behind and hit a run. The elevation I lay started to slide, I leapt to a wooden tower built for hoisting bricks when it fell behind me. I kept racing forward, a tide of fire tried to catch up.

I made another leap and smashed the ground. The tower fell sideways and crushed some of the knights. I swapped out the half-empty cylinder with the last one. I rested my back behind a long unfinished pillar and glanced at the commotion. The knights smashed everything looking for me, and a near-blast icicle formed beside me on the pillar and made me jump.

I climbed to the nearby bridge followed by a series of icicles. I slid behind a tram and made three hits without much aiming. One of them hit the icicles and pulled down the whole pillar on the knights. Dust covered the land. I ran through the bridge and took a few shots as the dust cleared.

One of the few knights on foot espied me and raised his arm. I pulled the trigger once, twice and thrice but he bested me, the bridge rose as it plunged beneath on the other end. A group of knights formed, I threw the Eagle against them and jumped

out to the pile of arms. Arms without triggers, arms without barrels, arms without stock. My ears screamed with the noise above, my thigh bled again, I extracted the half-empty Eagle and sprayed blindly at the knights who would have killed me if I didn’t act. The knights caught in bright blue flame, brawling, icicles exploded from their arms, some melted and poured with the flame.

I sat there unable to move, trying to figure out what had happened. The dust and smoke slowly cleared. Far away there was a movement, behind all the fallen pillars above the bridge. I pulled an element from the knight's bag on the way. It was a short creature. I loaded the arm. It stopped and glanced towards me. A gnome. I passed the pillars and reached a half-stripped dead knight. The gnome wasn't there, he just vanished with the dust.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Giant pair of bucket grapples attached to thick yellow wires slid down slowly like a setting sun. The grapple caught one of the long metal rolls and descended above as the wire reversed. It scrolled through the storey and dropped it into a machine, there were like a dozen such hanging grapples distributing rolls.

The edges were occupied with giant pressers that stamped metals, saw-blades with sharp grapple cutting through metal tubes, drillers that sprayed cold water, and spinners that sprayed spark. The noise demanded to press the communicator to my ear whenever Edwin talked, the Knight Commander's announcement hardly reached my ear.

“How are they still running?” I shouted into the communicator.

“They have separate power controls excluded from the necessities,” Edwin said.

“Why is that?”

“There are two power supplies and two controls for primary supply, if one goes down, the second back it up before there can be any latency,” he said. “Running these machines on backup power wouldn’t be conservative.”

I spotted a knight walking before me, in perfect range and focus. I drew out the arm and unloaded its cylinder.

“No,” Edwin commanded. “The machines are easily combustible.”

I put my arms back, the knight was still in range, I sneaked behind him and launched myself. He hit the ground with my knees on his back and hands on his head. I saw another knight striding against us, I struck him before he could reach, his body smashed against the metal rolls and bounced back. My hands caught his head and got twisted as he fell. I pushed one and pulled the other, the neck cracked like a hard nut.

I spotted a few more heads holding torches. I quickly went behind the rolls and unzipped the bag just to realise I wasted the smokers. The heads came towards me, I started to move around the rolls and caught the last one in the bunch from behind, A bright beam of light blinded my eyes. It was like an element cylinder the size of a head, with slits like in the smoker. The cylinder smashed into pieces, pouring the element as I landed my knuckle. The body looked like metal armour the size of an orc but was attached with a metal skeleton underneath. I realised the other things kept striding without noticing the dead knights.

I jumped back behind the rolls as a rumbling alarm fainted by loud machine noises, and breezed through the storey. “What’s that?”

“Leave there,” Edwin screamed through the communicator.

I bolted through the storey blindly passing all the walking machines and noises but halted and retreated when a cry tore far ahead of me. Three knights, three only knights who existed in the entire storey other than the one I smashed, I assumed, were butchered into chopped meat. Smoke exhausted from the barrels, the three barrel guns spun slowly, waving to the corners. Six on either edge, each mounted and locked with the walls adjacent to one other, in such a way they didn’t collide. A

small metal-stripped window above it, for the smoke to leave I guessed, element cylinder peeped out from each gun.

The machines were gathered around the spilt element, grapples kept transporting the rolls, and the machines continued to make noise. One of the grapples came above me and slowly dragged down. In instinct, I grabbed the roll and climbed on it. It raised me to the ceiling, I could see the storey shrink below me, the walking machines were everywhere, equally spread across the storey. Suddenly the grapple stopped and scrolled through the storey. I was above a metallic stripped presser when it stopped again. Instead of waiting for it to descend I jumped into one of the three-barrel guns to avoid getting caught by it. The other guns didn't fire as expected. I waited for the grapple to drop the roll and jumped into it when it raised again. It was the worst mistake I made, it dragged me back from where it had picked me up. Before it could reach the tube, I jumped into another grapple carrying a tube. It took me back to the gun, and I made the jump again, but that time instead of jumping into the grapple, I jumped into the close by gun. It was a huge leap, yet I made it without getting caught. I was pretty sure I wouldn't do that again.

A breeze of dry air hit me from the slits, it was a ventilation shaft. The metal louvre came apart when I pressed it hard. It was big enough, I squeezed myself through the dry metal cave. I crawled straight and turned once I hit the wall, I moved towards the slits of light, the space stank in dryness, I kicked open the door and peeped out. Luckily there was no firing, there was a gun below. A bucket grapple scrolled before me, I immediately went out and jumped to it. I could see the stairs approaching, eight machines and exactly eight machines walked near it. I was stuck, the roll dropped, the grapple raised again and started to scroll back. Another grapple holding a roll approached me, I pulled out the arm and fired instead of swapping. The roll

smashed the floor creating a heavy crack. All eight machines ran to it. I jumped down and landed behind them.

CHAPTER NINE

Bright hot metal flowed through the stone chutes that spread like slides everywhere throughout the storey. Stone bricks accompanied by platforms with yellow balustrades held the chutes from falling.

Under all those chutes was the army of knights, from whom I couldn't spot a single knight without an arm. I climbed on the stone and walked on the edge of the V-shaped chute. The knights who were missing from the mill were all there. The noise of the machines was still audible, but the flowing and bubbling of hot metals overlapped them.

The chutes led to the stone furnaces, above which a series of airshafts were built. I scanned my surroundings and used the platform to get into a shaft. The walls were wider, hotter and dryer. I could feel my hands being cooked under the gloves. After a long crawl, the shaft took me to the other edge of the storey, with large furnaces lined along. I jumped into the platform hanging above them, the furnaces roared, and boiling metal popped like water bubbles. I spotted a knight before me on the platform, warming above the furnace. I decided to jump down but knights were surrounding the furnace, so I took the connecting chute and walked between the platform and the furnace. When I finally reached a shaft I went into it. I crawled straight, climbed a wall, slid through a slope and eventually reached the opening. It was an opening down, below which I could see the stairs. I opened the metal plate and peeped out, there weren't any knights, so I jumped down onto the platform and hid under the shaft. I felt the presence of the knights near me, so I crouched and crawled through the stair.

However, when I reached the opening, knights were guarding it again. I quickly hopped under the stairs and took a shaft again. It was a different shaft, not something made for foundry. The walls were perfectly polished and clean. I climbed the slide like a mouse climbing a mountain.

“Your negligence kills me,” Edwin’s voice echoed all through the tunnel.

I rushed my fingers to switch off the communicator but it was already off. I could see the great hall through the opening under me as I crawled towards the voice. It was a room filled with folders. Edwin’s room. The door was locked, and Edwin was sitting on his desk with his hands resting on the communicator.

“He won’t cross the foundry,” a familiar voice said.

I bent down to get a clear view, big blue armour, huge chest plate, fur collar, blonde hair, scissor jaw and a familiar smile.

“I hear thee say that for the third time.”

“We should play it carefully, more than this will kill him,” the knight commander said. “I want him alive.”

“What if Orzaghmen abandon him,” Edwin said, “Orcs don’t care for their blood.”

“But elves do, don’t they?”

“Do they?” There was a moment of silence. “Anyway, I have seen enough today. I want you to leave-”

“Immediately after we get him. You have my word,” he took a sip from a nicely sculpted metal jug.

“I have reached your storey,” I could hear my voice echoing from Edwin’s communicator.

The jug dropped, and the knight commander jumped to his feet and rushed to the door screaming at his colleagues. There was an immediate commotion. A wave of footsteps raced away. Edwin stood from the desk waiting for the silence to reappear.

“How?” He pushed the communicator switch. “The foundry-”

“I sneaked through the airshaft.”

I kicked the grilled plate. The bolts came off, but the plate didn’t move. Edwin’s head immediately looked up, staring into my eyes. I kicked again, the plate flew into the room.

Edwin jumped to the corner, pushing the chair and a few folders from the shelves. He was fresh and elegant, just the way I saw him before, his hands trembled to hold something for support. He didn’t speak a word, even when he saw the arm pointing at him.

“Listen,” he said, lips tipped, and a bead of sweat falling from his forehead. “It’s unintentional. I was-” A loud crashing noise interrupted him. He pushed more folders down, shivering to death. “Trying to stop…”

“No, you didn’t,” my other hand shook like a litter can. There was a wave of footsteps... Approaching. I turned back at him, he tried to push through the shelves away from the arm.

“They are coming,” he said in a mild quivering tone. The footsteps got louder. I stood between him and the door looking back and forth. The shaft was unreachable. There were no windows. I dropped the arm and smashed out the door. There was the knight commander, running towards me followed by the

other knights. I rushed through the opposite side into the corridor. There was a loud angry roar and a burst then a harsh announcement.

"Use no arms, I want him alive."

I pushed back when I ran into another group of knights. I was blocked either way. *No, no, no…* There were no airshafts to climb, so I triggered the ring and dropped the last smoker I had. I used my left shoulder to smash through the window. I felt the air and I was out. I was out of Condor, I was away from the knights, I was far away from the knight commander, and I was falling. Falling through the soft blue sky, towards the giant cluster of clouds. I pushed myself in the air and turned upwards toward the giant castle with huge wings floating in the sky. 'Condor' not because it was big, but because it flew.

CHAPTER TEN

The unusually bright day left dark shadows, even in the woods; we played throwing games with dry coconut husks that my four-foot giant brother lied had been plucked by him. He smashed our faces with each throw, causing swell and red marks around the eyes.

"What was that?" I said. A hound howled far away, followed by a wheeze of a giant star that fell through the sky in the east.

"Stay back," he blocked us.

I stood there, staring at the star until I realised it led to our house. I shoved his hands and plunged through the woods. I ran through the overgrown trees, jumped above its roots and slid through the slopes; even after getting close to the house, I couldn't run fast enough, horrible thoughts and frightening visions flooded through my head. I stumbled into the entrance, hitting the door.

Blood dripped down the entrance, my foot stuck on the wet floor as I took my first step in. To my left was a knight laid dead. He wore colossal armour, his hand extended towards the long blade which was much taller than his whole size, his jaw shivered like a wet cat caught in winter, his eyes sank in blood, and his body under the waist was missing except for blood.

There were other men lying, men without limbs, men with heads half chopped like busted fruits, men who had been completely beheaded; in the middle of all was my orc-elf father, kneeling with his hands on the giant axe covered in blood. His

head faced down, hidden under the spilling blood, sneered like a wild beast.

I blew back through the door, into the woods, crossing a huge metal orb, past the valley, past the riverbed; the wind struck against me as I finally reached the top of the hill, betrayed by my legs I jumped through the red sky that eventually turned dark, taking me into the deepest pit. I kicked my legs and fought the burning aura, pulling me back by my shoulders when I hit the surface. I found myself sitting in my room, it was empty as always, save the wrapped cotton bed and the oak desk against the window. My ears caught the distinct voices of orcs, I realised the pain on my shoulders, I was alive, I thought. I made it but I could feel the blood flowing to my paw. I felt the dizziness hit my head and fell back on the floor. I woke up inside a dark chamber.

“Master Clinten,” a voice echoed.

I felt my heart thumping back and forth, and a dark figure appeared above me, with a glint of sadness in his eyes.

“Where am I?”

“Where you were,” Ellmut said in his sudden bright tone.

“It flies.”

“All Condors do.”

The closed chamber was filled with liquor bottles, tied to the walls. I was on a rugged cot made of hay that occupied more than half of the narrow floor. Ellmut stood before it, his voice or stance didn't change a bit. I wondered why he was sad, and then I remembered Edwin, *is he dead?* Whatever happened, I didn’t want to know nor need to; I knew it wouldn’t take me out of Condor. Then I realised I was already out.

“How did I survive?” I heard my thoughts spoken aloud.

“Like how everyone did.”

“Everyone?”

He pushed open the door behind him, without moving his eyes off me and extended his hands to welcome me. I stretched up and threw my heavy legs down, I felt something was missing, I wouldn’t have realised if there wasn’t a tight patch around my shoulder. It was dry and clean, so I stood up, carefully walked and stepped out of the chamber.

The metal platform where we stood spanned across the edges connecting a series of chambers with stairs. Under us extended the worn-out refugees of gnomes and dwarfs, occupied the whole storey, clustered around a line of finely pruned trees that divided the storey into two.

“This way,” Ellmut led me as he walked through the platform, he took momentary glances behind to make sure I was following.

While we were walking, I had a chance to peek into the chambers. It was the same size as the one I lay in, but instead of one, it was occupied by six to seven gnomes and dwarfs. I took a turn from the edge and followed Ellmut down the metal stairs. It was like walking into the old orcs’ market, everyone stared at me, and everyone recognised me, but I knew none. Most of them were severely wounded, and some of them even had their limbs and skin missing. Ellmut stepped near the pole that connected the floor with the ceiling, near a square bump with a metal door that slowly opened out. Under was another stair that spiralled down like a hillside road.

“Didn’t the knights find this place?”

“Not yet, only a few walk in here unaware, we have watchers, we immediately jam their signals and capture them.”

“How didn’t they notice the missing count?” I said.

“We throw them along with yours.”

“Indeed.”

I started to hear a hard blowing of wind as we walked down. An elemental aroma hit heavily from the wide plantation. Bright crops stood out glowing like elemental flowers, it seemed like it would be extended throughout the storey. We kept walking, climbing down without pausing to take a deep look or to discuss it.

The storey was blocked by a solid stone wall with few windows almost in size of a massive door, behind that, the space was filled with scraps and broken machines. The wind blew through a funnel-like well in the middle of the storey, fragments and junk kept blowing from it, forming a dense pile around it.

“What’s that?”

“A disposal,” he said. “We used it to dispose of the waste, but now it’s working in reverse as we are in motion. It’s intentionally left open, sucks everything below in a particular range like a mammal’s nose.”

Did I come through this? I wondered.

“Most of us did,” he said like he heard my thoughts, glancing at a huge truck that rode on the pile.

We walked into a wide chamber filled with machines, levers, large drivers and of course dwarfs.

“Another control…”

“The backup control,” he corrected.

“Can we open the gate with this?” I asked the first question that rushed into my head.

“No,” he said. “ We can do nothing with it, it works only if the primary fails.”

Disappointed, I followed him into a cave-like opening inside the chamber where the dwarfs worked against one large machine that spanned in size of a truck. We passed them all and walked into another opening where another dwarf was sitting alone wrapped with tight tape around his shoulder, just like mine.

“Armdan!!!”

He turned like a sloth, trying extremely hard to make a smile. “Unfortunately, I couldn’t stay with you Clint,” he said as if he left me for urgent work. The concern that had existed in his eyes was turned into sorrow, still, he managed to talk like he had.

He explained briefly, how they ended up there, about the backup control and how they broke into it to take the communication line. They had overheard everything that was communicated within Condor, He openly explained how they formed the rebellion right under the knight commander’s nose, their edges, their limits, and what stopped them.

“So, you cannot power the gate?” I wondered one last time after he completed everything.

“This is a backup control,” he explained, something Ellmut already did. In the end, he added the dumbest solution. “It works, but to work completely, the primary control should be destroyed.”

“So, can you open the gate after that?”

“We won’t need a gate if we get the control.”

“It’s waging a war against the knights.”

“Ahhh. Now you get it…”

It’s madness, I thought as I rose, flexing my elbow that got jammed due to the tight bandages. “I wish you success then.”

“I wish Orzaghmen was here instead,” he said in the most offensive tone. We all would have made it now. We all, including Edwin Wilburt.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Red Beard worked for Orzaghmen, I knew him since I knew my mother. He knew everything and everyone. He was the oldest and wisest the world had ever known. When Edwin built the arsenal, Orzaghmen vowed to protect it; he needed someone who could be reliable, so he sent Red Beard as a guardian and messenger. Anything unfortunate happened, he was their first contact.

"Did you use this to ask for help?" I asked. I stayed for hours in the chamber accompanying Armdan, pitching solutions and trying to find a better way to survive.

"We did," he said. "It didn't work."

"Then try again."

He eyed me with pure irritation, "we are sending every incident happening, it's either not reaching them or there is no one to reach."

Yes of course, if they could find out about Condor's location, they might have had no difficulty finding Red Beard. Killing him would have been their first step.

"So how will you do this?"

"Do what?"

"Destroy the control…"

Armdan took a cylindrical case under his desk and held it on his lap, he pushed the handle on the end of it and turned it

upside down. A series of rings that were stacked closely slid out when he pulled the handle.

“It converts the elements into explosives,” he said. “And it can be activated remotely.”

He pushed them back into the cylinder and locked the handle. I wanted to ask how they would plant it when the whole storey was flooded with knights but I swallowed when a dwarf rushed through the door.

Red lights flickered behind him, “They are here.”

Armdan darted out of the chamber and joined a group of five dwarfs. He opened a metal box that looked very much similar to a weapon crate. Inside emerged three pairs of arms held by a wooden stand. The dwarfs grabbed one for each.

Armdan hit a glance at me, “you may need one.”

I picked the last one up hesitantly, it was not the Ant or Eagle, it was a short, handy, single-barrel Bulldog, but that didn't make it light; it was as heavy as a half-ant. Before leaving, Armdan warned us that those attached to the arms were the last elements. I followed them to the stairs blindly. When we reached the swirling stairs they became still, one of the dwarves at the top slightly opened the door and peeked through the gap. He then jumped out, fully unbinding it and signalled the others. I followed them like an obedient child. They randomly took covers behind the short machines, pillars and trees. I did the same behind pillar support. The storey that was filled with the crowd was then empty, the chambers above were tightly closed, and it was completely silent that I could hear my breath. I scanned the whole storey and finally found the holed plates that passed on either side of the tree line. Under-floor storage.

Footsteps surfaced from the end of the storey, they were casual and confident yet well-equipped with arms. There were exactly four of them, I would have run away if there was one more, for if one of them took out two of us I would be forced into a deadly situation. Luckily that didn't happen, I wish I had the Eagle, but the Bulldog was better, I could hold it in one hand even though it was heavy. We waited as one of the dwarves held his hand in the air. When he let it down we immediately started to fire, two knights fell immediately, and one of the knights jumped behind the pillar. And the last one disappeared. The firing suddenly stopped, the cylinders had been emptied. They knew we were done, and I realised I didn't fire at all. A knight stepped in front, holding for us to show ourselves. I took a long deep breath and emerged. He had the hold but was slowed by his weight. The leads thrashed his armour. I ducked into the cover back and realised how quickly the element was exhausted. There was another knight behind the cover. His communicator made some weird noises. He tried to call for backup. The dwarves glanced at each other but none had saved the element. We couldn't rush directly as the knight was armed... As time went we got nervous. A dwarf looked at all of us individually and nodded. At first, I thought he would rush and try to take the knight out with bare hands. But the dwarf just ran into him and exploded into pieces.

Pieces of the knight's armour scattered on the floor. I expelled heavily, dumb, weak, trying to figure out what happened, but the dwarves got at ease and moved; the plates opened and the refugees climbed from the storage. He must have had a grenade, which he must have triggered when he was close to the knight. Just the thought of it made me sick.

"Thanks," Armdan said as he rose through the stairs. He walked past me and stamped the half-split communicator that survived the blast.

“Why?”

“We can jam the signal,” he said. “But not forever.”

The dwarves who went came back with three corpses of other dwarves. I glanced at Armdan.

“Watchers, only three, less suspicion.”

“How many times has this happened?”

“This?” He wondered. “This is the fourth.”

“And how many dead?”

“... a lot,” he agreed.

The watchers send a warning when the knights approach, with no arms so that they would be unaware. When they enter the storey their communicator would be blocked, no way out. The other knights would never know until they repeat the same.

“How will I get out, after planting?”

“Just dive out.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Who is this Knight Commander?"

"We don't recall his name," Ellmut said. "He was a nobody. It's after you went, a group of men who were so adamant to fall, raised. They hunted us like animals. Their dominance soon spread like fire."

Us, I noticed.

"He was one of them, rising in the ranks. I heard he owns a blade, he loves it more than his woman. It's seen more blood than a butcher's cleaver. No one has ever survived facing it." He turned towards me, "he just hates us."

"Why don't you hate us, Ellmut?" I asked. "Why do you treat us differently?"

"Difference is relative, master Clinten," he smiled. "You are not different but new, the world will follow. Someday."

We walked into the chamber at the beckoning of a gnome, who signalled us. I took my position near the two supports, in the centre of the edge, close to the entrance. They used a trail similar to the one in the inventory, but smaller and more functional. The chest piece dragged down hanging by the chains. I went through it as Ellmut pushed me in. Another gnome brought forth a metal glove in blue. It went above my fingers and pulled my whole hand. I donned the other glove and stepped on the metal boots that covered my whole leg. I realised why they didn't attempt to do it themselves, for it was incredibly heavy and cumbersome to wear.

I took the first step like a jacked machine and slowly moved to the middle of the crowd. A large group of gnomes and dwarfs were gathered to send me off. Ellmut brought a metal hook and caught the armour into another trail.

“No worry, Clinten,” Ellmut said. “You have successfully destroyed a mole, remember.”

“What’s a mole?”

“The headless machine you fought within the mill,” he said, stepping back.

I could see the whole crowd as I went up, it slowly dragged me into the above storey through an opening and halted near the elevator. I unhooked the chains and caught the grill platform with my feet.

“Listen,” Armdan’s voice echoed from the communicator inside the armour. “It’s fairly complex, you spread the explosives equally and leave.”

“What about the Knight Commander?”

“He’s in the Control,” he said. “He shall die in it.”

I stretched my toes, put on the helmet and proceeded to the elevator. It was empty, completely dead and held slightly above the storey.

“What should I do?”

“Open the floor.”

I did everything, exactly how he instructed me to, I pulled out a tube from elsewhere and the cylinder it connected. I detached the cylinder and cornered it, replaced it with a cylinder from the bag they had attached with me. The element

immediately started to flow through the tubes, it was like reloading the arm.

“Guess it works…”

I raised all the switches, an engine roared below, and the door automatically dropped. I closed the plate, stood back and waited for it to open. Two Knights who stood as guards approached me.

“It works!!” One of them said in his cracked voice.

“It always did.”

The two knights glanced at each other.

“Yes it did,” said the other knight.

“Where am I going,” I talked through the communicator, sauntering past the knights towards the metal stairs.

“There is a problem in deploying the explosives,” Armdan said.

“What is it?”

“We don’t have enough synthesised elements,” he explained. “We have to grab some from the delivery storage.”

I stopped behind the container where no one could spot me, the short ladder had gone up. Must be the flood. I checked on four sides and jumped to catch the ladder but the armour weight stopped me.

“What are you doing?” He hissed.

“Trying to climb…”

“You can walk around.”

“But the elements -”

“Those won’t do, the synthesised ones are stored in large crate-like boxes…”

“Like the trams with arms?”

“Precisely.”

I walked around the storey. The lever room where I set off the flood was wrecked. There were pieces of element cylinders the knights burst while firing. But the corpses were all missing.

Did they survive, I wondered. But realised that doesn’t change anything either.

After hours of searching, I finally found the huge column of trams dominated by the containers around. I got to the first tram, “what should I do?”

“Did you find it?”

“Yes.”

“There will be a knob-shaped lever between the upper end of the tram doors.”

“I see it.”

“Low it gently to the other end.”

The knob pressed itself as I kept my finger, and bars under the latches moved one by one under the doors. The slit emitted a sudden burst of red glow between the doors when the knob reached the end.

“It turned red…”

“Try another.”

I walked away like nothing happened even though the tram glowed like a red lamp under glass. I reached a tram away from the knights and far away from the glowing tram. I pressed the knob to the end and it did the same, and Armdan repeated the same.

“Why is this happening?”

“The trams contain two-step protection so that it cannot be obtained by the knights,” he said. “It needs a special key to open, which we don’t have.”

“So why are we wasting time trying.”

“There are complaints that most of them don’t work properly, we are trying to find something like that.”

“What are the chances?” The third tram also turned red as I pressed the knob, I pulled it again and pressed down. The glow went off when I pulled it back.

“It’s based on how lucky you are.”

He strongly held his patience for a long time, but not until I failed the ninth tram in a row. He suggested trying to find elements that were left in the open, but we weren’t fortunate in that either. I got back to trying the tram doors, and finally, after trying a dozen of them, I put my fingers within the doors and tried to pull them to the sides. The doors broke apart, the edges changed to green, and cold air ejected from the opening. Inside there were containers holding cylinders of elements.

I made sure none of the knights saw me, “I opened one.”

“Un grand merci,” he murmured. “How many elements do you see?”

“A lot.”

“Take seven.”

“We already have two,” I tried to let him know.

“We need at least eight,” he said. “And one extra for the elevator.”

I loaded the elements into the bag when the announcement boomed through the storey. It was the voice of the Knight Commander himself, bold and elegant. I could catch only a few words, but those were enough for an average one like me to infer the situation.

“They are coming for you,” I shouted over the communicator and then regretted, by looking around. “They know you are hiding.”

“We know,” he said. “They are not that dumb.”

“They just found it, I can reach there before them.”

“No, you shouldn’t,” he rejected me. “We should stay on the plan.”

“But-”

“Would you have accepted to do this, if we had told you that there is only one hope to survive?” he asked.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

They say when Orzaghmen was born, he had no chance of survival, he was taken far from the orcs and elves and brought up alone in a small hovel in the woods. His birth was a mystery for a long time, no one bothered to find the truth nor him. But it was completely different in Edwin's birth, the news spread through towns like a myth and folklore, and the elves exploded in anger when they found out that their blood was embezzled, they wanted to end it before it could become normal. They killed his mother. His father, a high-born elf, sacrificed himself and promised his son wouldn't produce offspring.

Edwin grew up with the dwarves, as a craftsman and architect, his weaponry skill was to the sky, and he shone like a morning star in it. The elves didn't have a choice rather but to accept him. Even though he was forgiven, he was not welcomed as one of them, the men opposed it as a dishonourable sin. So Edwin built his own home, Condor. A real home that enlarged along with the knights, as an arsenal, a pride, and then a monument.

And later it was a crowded army camp filled with knights, marching around like stiff stallions, loud commands passing from one another; the tents were erected, weapon loads laid everywhere, loads and loads of weapons. It was completely exploited, both in and out with no compromise.

"How do I put this?" I was in the isolated corner near a mole statue, holding a thick two-layered metal ring. Unarmed and exposed.

"Pull it apart and get it close to the wall," Armdan explained.

I did the same, a metal frame like a mouth flipped between the rings and stuck with the wall like a lodestone. I pulled out a cylinder from the bag and dropped it into the mouth, it grabbed the cylinder like an alligator grabbing its prey. I would have taken it as another supply of power if I hadn't been told it was an explosive. It appeared exactly the same.

“Seven more,” I said under the helmet as I walked into the knights again. I exchanged glances with lots of knights but didn’t risk making steady eye contact. Armdan was right, I didn’t see the Knight Commander yet, but he wasn’t in control, he was passing all the instructions from Edwin’s chamber.

It became handier when I planted the third and forth. I felt like an expert, I started to put the cylinder within the frame and toss it on the walls when no one was looking.

That was not enough for the risky part, the air between the knights slowly reduced as I went close to the control, knights stood above the bridges monitoring everything. I slipped the metal frames on the walls as I moved along with the knights. I made another lap through the storey and planted two more elements, one near Edwin’s office and another under the thick pier.

I tried to plant the next one within the camps, but when I reached there, the knights were gathered, busy loading their weapons. Boxes of gunpowder lay between their legs, I dropped a cylinder on the floor and went back to the Control. The empty open frames stayed as it was left when I reached it, I slipped a cylinder in the mouth as I walked by.

Bright red lights flashed above the storey, followed by an immediate awakening. The alarms spun around the levels, I was almost convinced I would be dead.

The knights stood staring towards the ceiling when the announcement broke out, “need recruitments… lower base… a thousand… a thousand-” A more bolder and stable voice completed it, “units assemble. Lower basement.” The knights hurried into action, some moved towards the camps for weapons, and some started to move down the stairs.

“They found you,” I called out. “They found our hiding, do you hear?” The knights pushed past me on both sides, and I turned and ran with them.

“Do you hear?” A voice cried after a long buzz.

“Yes, I do.”

“They found us.”

“I know, I am coming.”

“No,” his sudden roar broke my pace. “Finish it, there are still chances, we can make it.”

“But-” I looked at the last three cylinders hanging in the bag.

“Go back.”

I had no idea what I would do or what I could do if I happened to reach them before the knights, so I turned back and walked against the rushing army. There were a few glances, I lowered my head and kept my pace until a thick metal hand jammed against my chest.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It took the edge of death for me, to realise Edwin was just like me, someone different, someone new, someone deserted. He was the beginning, he was the change, and he just wanted to save the home he found, just like me who wanted to find one. He was just selfish, just like I was. It was insane how I judged people very quickly, I never knew everything, there would always be blanks and I filled them with what I was and what I believed. It was not them, but me with what I knew about them.

"Wrong way, soldier," the Knight Commander's faint voice rang in the stillness. I stood still, tongue-tied, trying to understand what happened.

"Found the leader's hideout," the announcement echoed. "Surrounding, surrounding…"

"What happened to your armour," he said.

I looked down to find it was wretched and stained by men's blood. I looked at him, it was similar armour to what I and all other knights wore, except he didn't wear a helmet. A long cape was hung on his shoulders, the collars were silver fur and the cape itself was rich velvet that contrasted the armour. He frowned, the knights started to swarm around me, all holding heavy weapons and blades and glanced at one another.

"Why don't you take off that helmet of yours?"

There were a dozen knights surrounding me, and with the commander's glance, every single weapon turned towards me like the boults snapping into their gaps. I unintentionally hit the ground when a knight hit my knee. The Commander had his

hand on my helmet, a large grin emerged through his face from ear to ear as the helmet went off my head.

It hit the ground. A sudden blast. Everyone's focus turned away from me. A chain reaction continued, unevenly slitting the floor and passing invisible thrusts towards us. I swung away the element bag before I flew away from the Commander's hands. We all hit the floor at the same time, a metal pier fell from the distance and stuck through the floor. I lifted myself before the others could and started to run to the storey's centre as the bridge bent to collapse, one by one all the piers fell pulling the bridge along with them.

As I ran I saw two element cylinders rapidly outstripping me. It blew up like a giant soap bubble, again throwing me back. I tried to get to my feet but suddenly the floor started to rise, the spider statue drowned before and I was pulled towards it. The floor diverged itself behind me cracking and snapping. I slipped my balance and fell into the centre, through a wide trench made by the blows.

I fell straight until my eyes started to burn and saw the boiling lava in a giant stone furnace. I pushed myself into the void and fell away from it. Before I could get up and catch my breath I saw a series of glowing elements falling through the split above.

The magic broke. I fled before they fell into the furnace, creating an eruption and blasting it like an egg from inside. The floor rose again and the whole storey started to spin.

This time I almost reached the wall to hold but when I saw the stack of metal bars sliding down from the edge, I turned towards the eye and dived through it. The metal bars landed before me on the machines, slicing through them like an arrow between fruits. I thought I would land there, but the furnace had

made another hole through the floor. I was blown back with a rain of arms as they splashed on the ground.

I was under a heavy heap of arms, struggling to breathe, with no air nor light. I felt the floor under me, I heard the cracking and the chains breaking. I closed my eyes tight and took a deep breath under the suffocation and counted for the moment.

We dropped down like the rain accumulated, tearing through the floor like tearing through the tent. The first thing I hit was a triple track, supported by a bridge. I was glad for a moment but only my head landed there, my body pulled down and finally smashed on another track. I was disabled from head to toe, only my eyes were open, and I could see two trams dancing blur away from me. I felt the track declining, I held tight and clung to the unknown part of the track under my hands. The noise of metal scratching got louder, and the trams before me got bigger, I was immediately turned when the first tram hit me, a series of trams smashed on me and bounced down the track smashing one another.

I hung on the edge of the track like a dead man with my wrists burning in pain and my palms crying to let go. The fine sand of the testing ground shined below me through the steep. I left the hold and the only thing I felt was the sand catching my back and covering me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I was on my truck, riding through the darkness, waking up the entire road with that monstrous engine. Two wheelers and a hatchback truck were on me, they matched my truck and pushed from the side. I drifted onto a short road and lost one of the wheelers. The other one climbed the wall and tried to tear open my truck with its spines. I struck against its side and let it ride past me. By that time, the hatchback truck had grown near me. The tailgate slid open, and an armoured knight came through it and climbed the roof carrying a long metal arm.

He made a giant hole in the door on his first try, the edge was outlined with a red glow expanding like a burning leaf. I twisted the wheels and raised the engines when he reloaded for the next round.

With forty to sixty yards between us, with very less chances of getting caught, my heart stopped when the wheeler slid between the road and tossed my truck in the air. The element cylinders scattered and blew every spot it hit. The truck finally strike the road, crushing me like a nut within the shell. I was hanging downward with eyes barely open, collapsed on the ceiling when a large thick pair of metal boots approached me. He bent down and peeked through the burning window with his usual grin and called out that I was dead.

I heard voices begging and cursing, crying for life, some scared, some aggressive. The knights had dragged me to the centre of the testing ground and had put me on my knees. Centre again. The magic was completely broken and appeared like water floating on the ceiling. The gnomes and dwarfs came

crowded from the stairs and led in a long queue. The whole inventory was down supported by the cliff, only the edges of the storeys remained and the knights filled them all. I could see machines, floor plates, tracks and trams swimming between the edges. On the ground, there were dwarfs, gnomes and even knights lying in their blood. There were even arms, must be the empty ones I assumed. Through my blurry eyes, I recognised the two figures kneeling next to me, one was Armdan of course, but the other one was strange. Why did they capture Ellmut?

"I'm sorry boy," Armdan said in a voice overflowing with sadness. "I was too late."

"Look who's back," the Commander returned with a pair of knights alongside. "Clint Orzaghmen."

I didn't see that face before, it might have been hidden by some worries, or it was the face of triumph. But I recognised it then, I recognised the grin, I recognised the charm.

"It was you, who made me dead, ain't you?"

"Ahhh… I wondered whether you would remember me," he said. "A man who saved your life." He walked around us flushing, probably reliving his memories. Then his face suddenly changed, the charm was gone, blackness filled, accompanied by deep emptiness. "As a reward, it earned me the name 'Demented'," he said followed by a chuckle. "But good for me, after six years you came back to prove them wrong, and lead us to the great Edwin Wilburt.

"You did a huge favour, Clint, and I always owe you for that. If a small bait can take us to Edwin and his most wanted arsenal, then the same bait can bring Orzaghmen to us. Worry nothing cousin, we keep you alive till we catch them, until then we carry our burden."

“You catch none,” Ellmut snapped.

“Ahh… this one here, said he’s a friend, so I saved him for you to witness.” He slid his hand back and received a Bulldog from a knight in the pair and aimed it towards Ellmut.

“No-”

The story went completely dark, there was no burst. A knight ran towards us unsteadily, slowly bright red light started to flicker.

“Orzaghmen is here,” he spoke.

A noise broke out, and a massive piece of stone the size of three orcs put together, burst into the storey.

“The beast is here for the cub,” he turned towards me and chuckled again. He showed his charming smile as he shifted the canon slowly towards me. I took a last glance at Armdan and closed my eyes tight as the lead popped out. Everything went dark and someone pushed me down.

“Run,” Armdan screamed.

Ellmut lay dead with the lead reserved for me, stuck in his head. It slowly melted like summer snow, the commander cursed, clenching his teeth, his arm shifted to Armdan; his head exploded as he yelled again at me to run.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I stumbled rising and scrammed away from the Commander. More rocks followed, the gnomes started to panic, and the dwarfs used the commotion and raged against the knights. Every one of my steps landed in spots different from what I aimed for. In addition to my dizzy vision, the floor kept moving as it waved up and down. I fell a few times and crashed on the corpses, luckily got my hands on a loaded arm. It was a two-barrel, like an Ant but was steady and flat like a crossbow with barrels blown like the Eagle.

The machines and the tracks hung down from the top storeys, the trams floated in the magic, hot metal poured like a cascade, and knights occupied every storey armed and active, but my only fear was the Knight Commander.

Something kept pulling me to the centre, I adapted to run in a circle along with the spinning, I climbed above the rocks and jumped from the cliff and got into the inventory elevation through a hanging track. The knights from the inventory started to rush, so I used the arm. It sliced a knight's arm from his shoulder and spread to the chest. The knights behind him jumped into covers behind the weapon trams and tossed grenades. I was forced to slide behind a collapsed tram. One of the grenades caught the tram behind me, it threw me forward along with a burst of arms. There were seven of them each armed with non-elemental weapons save one with the Ant.

I threw the double barrel and caught my hands on a long barrel Eagle from the junk as I rolled to a better cover, The rage followed. I waited for it to slow down and finally when I heard the clack, I peeked out and shot a knight in a raging position. I ducked again and waited for another knight but was saved by a

rock. It rolled all the way through the edges and crushed them. I stuck to the wall when it passed me. I grabbed the Ant and climbed above to take cover but was spotted by the Commander. His arm created a wave of fire. I raced with it and jumped behind a wrecked machine, There was a clack, and his communicator made it loud. Beside him were two element cylinders. I aimed the Eagle and exploded one of them. Before I could go for the next he had loaded the Ant, The machine sunk into the floor like melting ice with each hit.

I didn't dare to go behind another tram, a heap of unfinished arms had poured from above blocking the path. It slowly declined like a heap of cotton being blown by the wind, and joined with the other floating objects, circling along with the spin.

An angry barbaric dwarf, a foot shorter than Armdan, raged behind the Knight Commander. I bolted in that small gap of firing, it felt light as I climbed, a part of the magic was still alive I noticed and it reacted with the spin. I jumped behind the heap taking advantage of the thrust. Knights. They stormed behind the heap. I had to jump into the bridge below me and run. The tracks started to bend as they did the same. It became more like climbing than running, the trams on the track started slowly to race towards us. They picked up speed, and I shifted the tracks and missed them. But the knights got smashed one by one. I jumped on a piece of floor that floated around. I strived to catch my breath but the Commander's sudden fire made me jump again. I caught an edge. The firing stopped, and I was relieved as it was his last cylinder.

But he threw away the arm and unveiled a long steel blade, a sharp, well-balanced blade with a long grip. The quillons extended to the length of the grip, and the flat-sided reflected the lights like a plain mirror.

I was frozen for a second, unable to trigger, unable to move, unable to run. Another group attacked him, this time it was a bunch of haired dwarfs. I caught a hanging machine and made the climb. I tried to climb as far as I could from him. When I caught an edge and pulled myself, I trembled at the big figure above me. It was an orc-sized headless mole from the mill. I instantly lost my hold and fell on a bridge two storeys below and caught between the knights. They were all armed with blades and hammers, one even had a mace larger than my head. A huge body fell from above and caught them all, broke the bridge and fell to the ground. It was a giant spider but made of a metal similar to the Mole. Part of the bridge supported by the cliff stayed above. I stood there exposed and had no place to move. The Commander was about to throw the blade at me when the ground started to pop with random explosions. The metal cascade had reached the element storage causing explosions. The knights rushed. I did the last thing that would come to my mind. I took the biggest leap I never dared until then. I landed my legs straight on the Commander's chest, sinking him into the ground. The explosions spread randomly, creating raining sand by opening the upper layer of the ground. Machines and rocks jumped and bounced back in the explosion. Wherever I turned it exploded like a bud or was already filled with burning fire. I jumped to my feet when I noticed the Dwarves' corpses around me. The commander waved his blade. I jumped away and missed it. I turned back and took another chance, I walked backwards as I fired the Ant until I heard the clack, until it shattered his mighty blade into pieces.

He didn't stop. He kept gaining towards me with his hand above his face. The fire spread to his shoulders, his cloak turned into dust. He dropped the hand revealing the skin covered in grey, and the broken soul in his eyes slowly turning into anger. He suddenly paused. Eight giant metal legs emerged from the ground behind him, he put his hands down and caught the pair of

jaws around his waist. He pulled them and turned around spreading his hands wide, which split the metal spider into two. The legs smashed the ground dead. He threw the jaw down and caught a rock that bumped into him. It was twice his size. I stepped back, I could see his armour cracking above his muscles when he swung it. It came to me, touched my face and squeezed it under. I rolled over several times before I lay dead.

My eyes refused to open, I felt my heart thumping aloud, and a metal boot landed on my chest. He was over me, standing above like every man in the legends, his blonde hair waved in pride, and his armour glowed with the bright flame of victory.

I saw the rock flying above him. I felt the cracks expand under me, and he flew from me, in just a tiny snap. The ground raised, and I felt something pulling me. I held tight, but it didn't work, I was in the air flying, circling along with the other things. The good side of my face smashed against the wall and dragged with the thrust, Everything spun and smashed against each other. I was thrown to the bright thick slit on a metal gate. I tore the gate and rolled out into the grassland.

An explosion. Behind me, throwing more junk and blinding light, I was almost dead but my eyes were wide open. Beside me a knight lay without a head, the day was as bright as when I went in. I lifted my head to see that beautiful green gate burning. I was out. Two big figures walked before me.

"Father-"

The other one was Red Beard, his hands extended towards me, holding a Bulldog. A long bright green lead emerged through it, came straight to me like a drop of blood, penetrated through my forehead, and made my head smash against the ground.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

My father was just another ordinary orc, when I was born he promised my mother to keep me hidden. I was brought up alone, only a few people knew I existed, one of them was Red Beard. It stayed that way for years until she came. The first time I met her was by an accident, she didn't know what I was, and thought I was just an overgrown man with sharp ears. I still wondered whether she acted dumb. She was the first woman I met, still I knew she was different, she roamed around the forest alone, she had no fear, and she often reminded me of my mother. We eventually fell in love. We lived in our small house among the beauty of nature and had three brave boys and almost a girl.

"Clint," she declared. A name that fit any race, I wondered whether my mother would have thought the same if she were alive. She always criticised me for his upbringing, he never stepped down until he was five until I brought the flattest stones from the valleys to build him a pavement.

He was not like us, never been. He was always far ahead, like his mother, roaming alone, reading legends, and talking myths.

When he came back one day, his mother was killed on my lap along with seven slaughtered men who lay all over the house, with blood flowing in all eight directions. I looked at his poor face, and then at my hands, the blood flowed with rage. I looked at his face again, it was full of fear, he didn't dare to take another step, nor take a last look at his mother. He hastened away like a deer that saw its predator.

It was the day I realised how weak I was, I returned to my clan, to my brothers; the elves followed. It was the same day Clint chose to stay away, away from me, away from his brothers, away from his home. The fear I saw in him was not of me but of him, fear he might become me one day. He went as far as he could, while I tried to keep him as close as I could.

Another horrible mistake. A knight chase. I shouldn't have sent him, I saw him dragged by the apothecaries, his blood left a thick trail on the floor, and his cries tore the whole infirmary down. They said he wouldn't make it, and the elves gave up, I was convinced, but deep inside I knew because he was my son, her son.

"They have marked him," the information came from a source in the men. We rarely sent the same smugglers twice, the only way to identify them was in the act. So there never was a problem for them to reach the arsenal. The chase happened only when they could confirm the rider was found with goods, that was while returning. Now that they marked one, they could catch him on the way to the arsenal. He would lead them straight to the weaponry, or even to us.

Edwin was our supplier, the most talented craftsman, the men hated him, so we embraced him as one of us. The hunt became furious, he rebuilt the arsenal with our support, new smugglers were involved, and the war exploded. Initially, there were some wins and some losses, but as it went they became dominant over the years. In the end, they completely stopped the supply, leaving us with nothing.

I summoned father, the others called him 'Red Beard,' he was the first orc-elf. Did a good job in hiding it for years, but his age started to give away rumours and talks. He might not be

the first one either, if there was someone before me, there might be someone before him. His father even gave him an Elvish name but he wittingly hid it with his red beard. He knew a lot, he had seen a lot, he knew every name, every path, every secret. He acted like our eyes and ears, he also took care of Clint.

“What if we send him?” I asked. “Where will he lead?”

“If they are still expecting, the arsenal,” he continued. “Else us.”

“Remind them,” I ordered. “What next?”

“They gather to take over the arsenal,” a sudden realisation hit his face.

“Gather everything we have, it ends this day.”

We had him hidden under one of our villages, far from men’s reach, he was more than glad to come out, to see the world again. We didn't tell him anything, not even a warning. He never fought a knight, and barely touching the little ones, explaining everything would only lead him to fear.

Everything went exactly how we anticipated until Edwin started to react.

“Someone started a flood in the inventory,” one of the brothers came up. “Three knights are dead.”

“Good fortune.”

“They say it’s him.”

“No, can’t be,” it can never be.

We waited for them to reach us, we had everything planned and prepared, every fighter, every weapon.

“Someone intoxicated the weapon storage,” another fortune. “It’s definitely him.”

“No,” I continued. “How many dead?”

“More than a dozen, they say.”

A pinch of uncertainty started to bloom within me. I went to Father. “Is it true?”

“That’s what they say.”

“Where is he now?”

“Under assembling,” he said. “Marking the knights, they say.”

No, he won’t… “Ask our people to hold.”

He turned abruptly, “Why?”

“I want to let him fight.”

He climbed each and every storey, cleaned them with blood like a true warrior, jumped out from the top, got up with the rebels, stole elements from inventory, planted explosives… He did everything alone, he passed into their own camps and walked among them.

He did well even when his identity was exposed, even when he became the primary target.

“Ask them to gather, we attack before they pass the canyons,” I ordered. “Where are the openings?”

“There is only one.”

“We go there.”

We didn’t have anyone to survive, anyone to narrate the truth, we formed an entire wall at the end of the canyons, and we gathered some of our people before the gate and ordered them to kill anyone who came out.

And then the unfortunate finally hit, the rebels were found and captured, along with him. The explosion didn’t go well. We had no time to consider, so we started. We couldn’t move our people as quickly, we had fewer people than we initially planned, but the time was perfectly right. The arsenal started to explode, like a box of fireworks. The gate crashed as we expected, Knights fell through it, and we killed everyone with no exceptions, let them be gnomes or dwarves.

I grabbed my arm and handed it to Father, he first stared at me questioningly.

“If he comes through…” I requested.

“Why me?”

“He should know it’s for good.”

“We could let him live…” he trailed off.

“He must run the rest of his life,” I continued. “He had done enough.”

“Why me?”

“I can't do it,” I shuddered. “You brought him up, he sees you as a father, if he sees you, he will understand.”

He hesitantly put his hand and pulled the arm from me. I wished she was there, somewhere in reach, so that I could go, fall under her and beg for mercy.

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Howl's Moving Castle
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Orzaghmen will return